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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on the effects of gender on supervision and the present status regarding gender within contemporary American culture. It presents a societal framework by reviewing three basic perspectives concerning gender differences, focused in areas of unequal distribution of power, socialization, and inherent differences. Following this is a discussion of gender issues related to therapy since supervision involves the oversight of counseling. Finally, supervision issues related to gender differences themselves are addressed, including differences in response to initiation of structure, style used in handling conflict, personalization of supervisee feedback, satisfaction with supervision, comfort with closure and initiation, and sources of power used by supervisors. Two related issues, sexual harassment and sexual involvement, are considered. Contains 8 references. (NB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

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Gender Issues in Supervision

Pamela O. Paisley

Introduction

Gender as a concept encompasses "culturally-determined cognitions, attitudes, and belief systems about females and males ; [it] varies across cultures, changes through historical time, and differs in terms of who makes the observations and judgments" (Worell & Remer, 1992, p. 9). Using this definition, discussion of the effects of gender on supervision must be built upon an examination of the present status regarding gender within this culture.

A Societal Framework

Currently, there appear to be three basic perspectives concerning gender differences. These perspectives are focused in areas of unequal distribution of power, socialization, and inherent differences. Combining information from these bodies of literature, we can construct an explanation of what it means to be male or female in our society.

First, men as a group within American society have more economic, political, social, and physical power than most women. Males and females also, however, are socialized to become different beings as well. Messages received from family, school, and media continue to be heavily laden with sex-role messages representing very different sets of acceptable behaviors for boys and girls. These social rules and expectations create remarkably disparate psychological environments for development based on gender. Finally, in terms of inherent differences, those characteristics stereotypically identified with women historically have been dismissed as of little value. Even within psychology, the model of the healthy adult has traditionally been described through masculine characteristics. Only in rather recent history have we begun, at any level, to hear and value "the other voice" (Gilligan, 1982).

This societal framework indicates the existence of a power differential and suggests the potential for bias in expectations and/or actions. With gender as such a significant social variable, it is unlikely that the effects also would not be apparent in counseling and supervision. These parallel processes must continually be examined within the larger context of society.

Two remaining factors are worth mentioning. Minimizing the importance of the differences between the genders discounts the importance of meaningful within-group experience while exaggerating this importance reduces the potential for individual difference. Additionally, it is important to remember that while much that we have come to understand about gender differences has been motivated by the women's movement, the potential for bias and discrimination affects both men and women.

Counseling Issues

As supervision involves the oversight of counseling, several gender issues related to therapy are worth restatement. Using the societal context as a framework, Bernard and Goodyear (1992) suggested three areas be considered and evaluated for gender impact and/or bias: (1) the issues which the client brings to counseling, (2) the perspective of the counselor, and (3) the choice of interventions. Complaints by female clients concerning therapy have tended to focus on counselor encouragement of traditional sex roles, bias in expectations, devaluation of female characteristics, use of sexist theoretical concepts, and continuation of the view of women as sex objects (APA, 1975). Counseling supervisors have a responsibility to help the supervisee evaluate gender as a factor of concern in case conceptualization, self-evaluation of assumptions and biases, and in selection of approaches.

Supervision Issues

The supervisory relationship, itself, is taking place within the same societal context as other gender issues. Bernard and Goodyear (1992) noted gender interactions in supervision related to response to initiation of structure, style used in handling conflict, personalization of supervisee feedback, satisfaction with supervision, comfort with closure and initiation, and sources of power used by supervisors. An additional significant research study found gender-related differences associated with the amount of reinforcement given to trainees' powerful, more assertive messages (Nelson & Holloway, 1990).

While, as in the counseling profession generally, much more research is needed to understand the effects of gender on supervision, these sample findings clearly indicate the potential importance of this variable on the supervisory relationship and process. Supervisors, in addition to assisting trainees with the associated counseling issues, must be aware — in fact, vigilant — in identifying any ways in which bias in expectations or actions might be occuring within supervision.

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Related Issues

Implicit in both counseling and supervision are two areas of legal and ethical concern related to the overarching issue of sexuality. These are sexual harassment and sexual involvement. These issues are gender-related, though they may manifest themselves in same or cross gender interactions.

Sexual harassment refers to unwanted sexual advances and/or contacts while sexual involvement between supervisors and supervisees may seemingly occur by mutual consent (Bartell & Rubin, 1990). Although subtle forms are more difficult to recognize and eliminate, most personally and professionally aware supervisors avoid the most blatant types of behaviors associated with sexual harassment. Through efforts at many institutions and agencies, individuals are being educated concerning the defining characteristics of harassment and the legal and ethical implications.

Unfortunately, incidents of sexual involvement continue and in some cases seem to be increasing. While the degree of coercion or consent may seem to separate these two issues, they have two factors in common. Both sets of behaviors are clearly unethical and both work to the detriment of supervision. Mutuality does not excuse abuse of power, and there is an inherent power differential in supervision — a factor which always provides a degree of question concerning true consent (Bartell & Rubin, 1990). Even the most egalitarian of supervisors must acknowledge a greater responsibilility and accountability in this area. Additionally, as a word of self-protective warning to supervisors beyond the need to behave ethically, research indicates that supervisees' perceptions of the amount of coercion tend to increase with the passage of time (Glaser & Thorpe, 1986).

An additional disturbing finding in this area of sexual contact (beyond damage done to individual supervisees and supervisory relationships) is that the behaviors perpetuate themselves. Students or trainees who become involved with supervisors are more likely to accept this as a norm and repeat the pattern themselves (Pope, Levenson, & Schover, 1979). The power of modeling in all areas related to gender should never be minimized. Even when contact is initiated by a supervisee, the moment can be a teachable one where ethical standards can be explained not as efforts to monitor thoughts and feelings but to regulate behaviors in order to protect certain types of significant relationships.

Conclusion

The supervisory relationship is an incredibly important one in the personal and professional development of counselors. In relation to gender, it is crucial that supervisors use the relationship as an opportunity to educate, confront, and model. This requires a special level of awareness of self and society. Challenging our own biases, prejudices, and issues is one of the most critical parts of the process. Because gender is one of our most powerful and descriptive characteristics, it tends to be one of the most sensitive areas of personal exploration. The sensitive nature of the topic as well as the potential for crossing lines associated with sexual discrimination, harassment, and involvement make it imperative that supervision take place within the clearest ethical parameters. Such parameters provide a safe and established environment for growth and development while modeling appropriate professional behavior for the next generation.

Within the larger social context, supervisors and counselors are also in a position to work effectively as advocates to address injustices implied in the previously mentioned perspectives on gender differences. Professionals can, perhaps, have the greatest effect in this area by promoting equity in institutions and systems, gender-fair practices in socialization processes, and a genuine appreciation for and celebration of both masculine and feminine characteristics.

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